

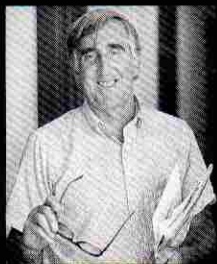
Fads and Fireflies: The Difficulties of Sustaining Change

Educator and historian Larry Cuban reflects on why reforms are proposed and what happens when they are brought to the complex laboratory of schools.

John O'Neil

With a background that includes teaching and serving as a school superintendent, as well as training as a historian, Larry Cuban is uniquely positioned to analyze the past century's many waves of school change. He is author of several books, among them *Teachers and Machines* and *Tinkering Toward Utopia*. He is coeditor, with Dorothy Shipps, of a new book due out this year, *Reconstructing the Common Good in Education: Coping with Intractable Dilemmas*.

In this interview with EL staff members John O'Neil, Holly Cutting Baker, Carol Tell, and Marge Scherer, Cuban returns to a central theme of his research: School reforms are a product of the cultural, political, and economic forces of their times. Although critics have charged that schools are too faddish, too prone to bend to the current "reform du jour," Cuban's view is that the implementation and sustainability of school reforms are heavily influenced by public deliberation and discourse. After all, "schools reflect what the public wants," Cuban reminds us.



Larry Cuban

On the whole, do you think that schools are too resistant to change or too faddish?

Our society is faddish. Schools as one institution experience these fads. Think of the corporate sector, for example. Total quality management didn't start in the schools, it started in corporations! Medicine, the fashion industry, the media—all



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are subject to these gusts of innovation.

People are highly critical of schools because they seemingly bend to every new fashion, but when we begin thinking about it, we could easily say that schools are one of the most democratic institutions we have. Schools reflect what the public wants.

In what ways?

Schools are extremely vulnerable to pressures from different constituencies. So if members of a school board or a cadre of parents say that schools ought to have tutors or a new writing program, school boards have a hard time saying no. This is so especially because there is often a lack of scientific evidence that shows that one kind of innovation is clearly superior to another.

When David Tyack and I wrote *Tinkering Toward Utopia*,¹ we used the metaphor of fireflies. We were speaking about the way that changes or reforms so frequently appear, shine brightly for a few moments, and then disappear again.

What innovations have the most staying power?

The innovations that have the best chance of sticking are those that have constituencies that grow around them. For example, when Title I funds were first appropriated in 1965 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, this program quickly got a lot of support from constituents, ranging from educators to parents to members of Congress. So Title I and many of the other titles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have stuck around, even though there has been controversy over whether Title I funds were being used effectively. Another example is the constituencies that have come together to support special education.

What else besides a constituency helps sustain a change in schools?

One of the biggest factors seems to be that the reform reflects some deep-rooted social concern for democracy, for equity, or for preparing students to lead fulfilling adult lives. Basically, schools reflect cultural, political, social, and economic changes in the larger society. The school is not an institution apart—if anything, schools tend not to be at the forefront of change in the society. They tend to reflect what the elites and coalitions of parents and taxpayers believe is important. Because of how the nation came about, there is an enormous stake in schooling as a way to improve the life chances of any child—we don't depend on hereditary privileges being passed from generation to generation.

Can you give some examples of social changes that have promoted lasting changes in schools?

Take the example of kindergarten. The nation was industrializing rapidly, and urban living for families, particularly immigrant and poor ones, had become more difficult. Kindergartens were introduced to public schools in the 1870s; before that, there were private kindergartens that were mostly aimed at middle- and upper-income families in the Midwest and New England and other places. Public kindergartens were introduced as a way of "preserving" childhood before kids encountered the rigor of grammar school or high school, as well as of teaching parents how to live in the cities. And kindergarten slowly spread, so that by the 1960s, kindergarten was a mainstay.

This gradual growth came not only from the formation of constituencies but also from a general belief that the earlier a child learns in formal situations, the better chance that child will have at academic and financial success. Public schools have always been looked at as an escalator for social mobility, and parents have always wanted to give their children an edge. So this notion of an early start gradually became fixed, and no one today would think of banning kindergarten or preschool.

Another example is the growth of high schools, and the

development of "comprehensive" high schools that provided different curriculums for diverse students. Up to the turn of the century, schooling for most children ended after grade 8. But by World War I, the comprehensive high school had been introduced and enrollment expanded. Labor laws kept children in school longer—and out of the workforce, where they were competing with adults. The democratic belief that every child has a different employment future pushed school administrators to provide different curriculums for different students. The high school was called comprehensive because it had a job future in mind for every kid coming to school and was seen as a very democratic institution because of the equality of economic opportunity that was presumed to be embedded in the different curriculums.

What characterizes reforms that don't stick?

The reforms that have the *least* potential for sticking are those that try to bring about changes in teaching, primarily because those innovations are often proposed by policymakers and officials who know little about classrooms as work places.

A lot of people think that because they've been in schools, they understand teaching, but the true complexity of the classroom is not clear to them. So what happens is that noneducators often will propose teaching innovations, and they may be successful in getting new laws and policies approved, but these policies will not necessarily be implemented. Attempts to change teaching and learning have often had a very short-term or inconsequential effect.

In *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, we make a clear distinction between policy talk, which is the current rhetoric in the media; policy action, which means that

programs or innovations are adopted; and policy implementation, which relates to what actually occurs in the classroom. It's important not to confuse these very different levels, but that frequently happens.

An obvious example is what's going on with the teaching of reading. People were led to believe that many classrooms were being taught through whole language because there was a lot of talk about it among educators and in journals and in the media. Actually, most classrooms were not teaching reading through whole language; most

have in their repertoire instructional strategies that use technologies. But I think that these will still be peripheral—I don't see the evidence that they'll affect the core practices of teaching.

Why not?

First, I reject the argument that's been made that teachers are resistant or incompetent or lack expertise or are technophobes. In the research we've done, we've found that teachers and students *are* using computers—both groups that we interviewed said that they use computers at home all the time. That made us refocus our attention on what goes on in school to try to explain the infrequent and limited use of computers for instruction even in those schools where there are abundant technological resources.

What we see is that the structure of school—for example, in the high school, where you have grades organized by age and

departments—works against a lot of the changes that have to be made for technology to be used in more imaginative and creative ways. So there are institutional kinds of concerns that have to be raised about the structures of elementary and secondary schools that I think come between teachers and their use of the technology.

Another reason we've found in our research that the technologies themselves have flaws. Time and time again, we found teachers scrambling to cope when the server was down, or the cascading effects of new software on two-year-old machines would cause the computers to metaphorically "blow up." And schools can't keep investing capital costs to purchase newer computers all the time. These are the realities facing



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teachers were using combinations of phonics and whole language to begin with. The evidence about the takeover of reading instruction by whole-language enthusiasts was very slim, but it was a great talking point for public officials who wanted to make a major issue out of it. So there's an important distinction between the policy talk and the policy implementation, and we shouldn't forget that.

You're working on a new book about school technology. What can you say about how technologies are being used in the average classroom?

Computers have become one of the tools teachers use, and many teachers

teachers. You can't expect a teacher to have a contingency lesson B when lesson A, which relies on using the computer, doesn't work. That's why teachers continue to use the textbook, the overhead projector, the chalk. They're reliable. They're flexible.

As you know, some analysts have said that to achieve true change in public education, we have to look to reforms that challenge the status quo of school governance. That's one of the arguments made in support of vouchers or charter schools. What are your impressions of these as an impetus for change?

Well, changes in government do not automatically mean changes in teaching and learning. That's often forgotten in the heat of slogans and bumper stickers about vouchers or charter schools.

To the degree that the schools can provide more choice within the public sector for parents and for children, I think that's a plus. When I was a school superintendent in Arlington, Virginia, we encouraged more alternatives. And I believe in that. But vouchers, which call for using public funds for private uses, give me pause. The use of private funds or public funds for private purposes will ultimately decrease the amount of resources for public schools. And I think that's unconscionable.

Basically, tax-supported public schools were set up in this country to build citizens, to help kids become literate, to strengthen their moral character, and, ultimately, to help them succeed in the workplace. So schools serve many essential social functions. They are institutions designed to promote democratic purposes and the common good. But the idea is that they are *public*. Vouchers assume a marketplace metaphor that suggests that every parent, every teacher, every school will compete to improve. Well, who's going to be concerned about the public good? The advocates for marketplace competition and for breaking up the public monopoly forget that. Schools were set up to develop citizens who care for a

community, who can contribute to that community. You don't have that when you go to the local supermarket. You're in there to get a product and get out.

Some surveys suggest that people have lost faith in public schools. What's your view?

Schools are part of the larger national fabric of institutions. There has been a general erosion of faith in government institutions, period. So maybe there's been some loss of faith, but I think that core faith that Americans have about

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education is still there. People believe deeply in the ability of schools to solve societal problems and to help children reach their potential. Think of that parent who wants her 2-year-old to get into a great preschool program that's going to be the escalator to Harvard or Stanford. Think of the recent immigrants—the first thing they want is to have their kids enrolled in school. So I believe the core faith is there. It's been rocked, but not shattered.

We've talked about the ways reforms have changed schools—what about the ways schools change reforms?

Schools, like other institutions, adapt most changes to reflect the unique environment. Think about kindergarten, where the change—as it first emerged—was to promote the emotional, intellectual, and social development of children through play and exploration. Well, kindergartens are now becoming boot camps for the 1st grade. This trend began, by the way, in the 1930s and 1940s, although it accelerated greatly in the 1960s and 1970s. Preschools have become more like kindergartens, and

both now aim to get kids ready for that 1st grade.

Another example is what's going on right now with social promotion and accountability. The "reform" was to hold kids accountable for meeting learning goals, and a lot of policymakers were adamant that social promotion needed to end. Students who didn't get satisfactory scores on tests should be held back.

But when these proposals collide with the complex reality of teaching and learning, there are often counter-movements, and schools must adapt

again. I read recently that three states are now moving to lower their cut-off score for holding children back or denying a diploma. This is consistent with what occurred during the last great wave of testing—the competency movement of the mid-1970s. As soon as it becomes apparent to middle-class parents that their kids are not going to be promoted, or will have to attend summer school, official positions of school boards start to crumble.

Again, does this mean that schools have failed to "reform"? My answer is that schools as democratic institutions are continually adapting to these external pressures and, in doing so, maintain old practices as they invent new ones. ■

¹ Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Larry Cuban is Professor of Education at Stanford University. He may be reached at School of Education, Stanford University, Stanford CA 94309 (e-mail: cuban@leland.stanford.edu). **John O'Neil** is Contributing Editor to *Educational Leadership*.

